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THIRTY-ONE YEARS OF CALIFORNIA

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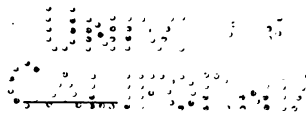
BY

THE REV. HORATIO STEBBINS, D. D.

on the occasion of the Thirty-first Anniversary of his Ministry in San Francisco,
SEPTEMBER 8, 1895

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THIRTY-ONE YEARS OF CALIFORNIA.

BY THE REV. HORATIO STEBBINS, D. D.

A recent writer says that autobiography has a flavor of egotism, inasmuch as it implies that the author must esteem himself of considerable importance to himself and the world to write out the incidents of his own life and experience, as if any one beside himself cared anything for them, or could be profited by them. Such a criticism is, however, a little acetic, and ignores altogether that fine simplicity of mind and heart with which those who have had a real human experience may record it, as a contribution to the current wisdom and truth of their time. Biography too, is, the literature of individual life; and, if a man is level-minded enough to tell his own story, as moonlight falls on a placid river, he may make substantial contributions from his own life to the life of his time. A truly fine autobiography is, in my opinion, a great writing, whether it be in the allegoric style of John Bunyan, or in the homespun way of Benjamin Franklin, or the simple, brave talk of General Grant. We get introduced to individuals so, and we live with them a while, and get acquainted, and learn more than travel can teach.

But such is not my affair this morning. I have little or nothing to say of myself. I wish only to say how things and men have looked to me as I have passed through the scene of thirty years or so, and to give a

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little estimate,— I will not call it a judgment,—or general result of experience.

Let me glance briefly at the material progress of California. I offer no tabulation of property or of products. I wish only to glance at a general fact. The discovery of gold gave inspiration to the pioneers, and it seemed that the country had no other value than that deposited in the mountains or along river-beds. The land was dry and hard, and the climate was new and strange to Americans. Few attached any importance to the agricultural value of the country, and the brilliancy of the precious metals obscured every other interest with dazzling light. Horace Greeley thought the country was only for mining, and that Marysville would be the centre of its wealth. But it has turned out that the agriculture of the country is rich beyond precedent, so that a farmer at the annual national thanksgiving-time questions whether he has any cause of gratitude in having more than he can sell. This feature of the country has played a very important part in the development of the State; and, while it is a surprise, viewed from the standpoint of the miner with his pick and shovel, it has been a disappointment also to the farmer from the standpoint of the plow. The accounts of wonderful production and marvelous wealth per acre had the effect, at one time, to make agriculture, the most conservative of all human industry, highly speculative and dazzling. The truth is, that agriculture, lying flat on the earth as it does, the bottom industry of society, is a very sober kind of business, and will not allow flights of fancy. It is a patient, careful, frugal vocation, wisely provided in the education of the world for the training of men by good habits of industry and economy. The development of machinery, and the application of animal

or steam power to the cultivation of the soil, has had the general effect—temporarily, we may believe,—to demoralize this great common vocation. It does very little toward “settling up” the country, or establishing society. It does not cultivate family life, and it makes labor fitful and dissipated. While it is a natural and, perhaps, necessary result of what may be called the application of machinery to a conservative pursuit, it has a tendency to correct itself by over-production, and to turn labor into other channels. It is true that fifteen men and a hundred horses, with machinery to match, working a part of the year on two or three thousand acres of land, do not have a great social effect in establishing communities or increasing the populations of a country, but they are better than rabbits or coyotes.

While there has been a steady development of agriculture, and a marvelous power of production, it is fair to say that the expectations of ardent minds, in regard to what is called the development of the State, have not been fulfilled. I think that a dispassionate, judicial, historic mind, if you please, will confess that the growth of California has been a disappointment. It has not been as great as we expected; certainly not as great as we hoped. Indeed, I think this may be said of the whole western coast, though the causes are not the same as with us here. Twenty-five years ago, men who were as sober as the rest of us prophesied that there would be five millions of people around this bay in a quarter of a century. After the opening of the first transcontinental road, it was said that there was as much land in California, including climate, worth one hundred dollars an acre for production, as there was in the Republic. And, twenty years ago, it was thought that this city was destined, in

the near future, to be the richest in the world! So we imagined, and so we talked.

And now I come to the quick and nerve of life, society, and manners, as they are here. Why has there been this over-expectation, this sanguine hope, this innocent credulity in regard to the material growth of the State?

I said, incidentally, on a former occasion, that no just conception of society here could be formed without taking into view the fact that, historically, the State is founded on the presence of the precious metals. It has been said that new discoveries of gold in the earth have kept pace with expanding commerce on the sea, and this has been regarded as one of the tokens of Providence in history. But not the discovery of gold only has this providential relation to the wants of man and the progress of the world. The discovery of iron, lead, copper, and tin have no less, but far greater, influence upon the industrial life of man, and are much more common in relation to his wants and to the progress of the world. But gold is value ready-made; and he who has it, by a kind of moral fiction, is rich. Hence, the gold-passion, as old as human nature, to take a short cut to wealth. Historically, the discovery of gold on these shores has been a great good, for without it this western civilization had not been; but, individually and socially, it has been attended with great evils. Let no vague censures be pronounced on the past; no cheap denunciation of those methods of history by which God causeth the wrath of man to praise Him, and the last of it he restrains. Oregon was settled before California, and the government paid a premium on marriage to hold the country. New countries are settled by *rude* methods, and one of the most cheering views of man's estate on earth is that

order and law and social beauty and refinement have risen from beginnings so humble, so rude, or so wicked. Nations, those great divisions of the human family, that seem to hold in their grasp the fortunes of the race, are made by war. The arts and refinements of life are attained only through the most fearful moral and physical exposures of vast multitudes of men. What an army of soldiers and sailors, and diggers and delvers, and tenders of hell-fires on land or sea, make it possible for us to live in a comfortable house, have a decent breakfast, under the protection of laws and manners! Whatever impression these things, and such as these, may make on us that this world is not finished yet, they are so, and have been, and will be.

The historic fact is, that the presence of the precious metals in the earth is one of the heaviest moral trials to men who are brought into close contact with them. The strange mixture of chance and rapid accumulation unships the mind of the average man from all the fastenings that make the great ethic of property and give it established relations to character. The mind follows a will-o'-the-wisp, or becomes itself a Jack-o' lantern. The man is intoxicated with the notion of having something for nothing, and his credulity swallows the moon, and he floats over seas from whose depths he hears the bells of sunken cities. A fascinating contagion sweeps through society, industry is swamped in speculation, modest frugality is ashamed in the presence of extravagance, and sweet benevolence is drowned in the tempestuous flood of thoughtless and unprincipled generosity. Individuals here and there may go untouched, as some enchanted house escapes the plague, but the common air is filled with vapors. This spirit, natural, inevitable as human

character is, had its full sway here; and it is one of the honors of American society that here, within half a century, has been established a commonwealth, with institutions of law, learning, and religion, that promise to give rank among the States of the world.

This spirit of speculation — gold-passion, if you please,—culminated in 1875, in the failure of the Bank of California. The restoration of that institution was the beginning of a new era; and, since then, the State, with diminished splendor to some eyes, but with steadier power to discerning minds, has been living out of its past. There is a habit of complaint among us, and fortune handles some very rudely; but there are few countries on earth where industry and frugality bring better rewards. The State is still new, and its population is small, and distances are great, even with modern ways of travel. But if we inquire into the facts of transportation and production, they are very striking and wonderful. I do not know where, on any continent, or in any country with a population of 1,250,000 and an area of 160,000 square miles, there are such facilities for the physical wants and comforts of men. The climates, through latitudes and longitudes from the soft south to the snowy north, from seashore to mountain range, are friendly,—too friendly, it may be, to challenge man's courage and resistance. To what extent climate, that powerful factor in the constitution and destiny of races, is to modify our modern civilization here, it is impossible to tell. We must face the fact that, thus far in the history of the world, cold weather has been the wise step-mother of men. What new invention, what cosmopolitan art, can give energy to lassitude, will to indulgent ease, and economy to carelessness, we do not know. The base line

of material progress is industry and economy. This explains the fact that a people with a stingy soil have gathered more, often, than those where prodigal nature has strewn her neglected gifts. These are encouraging signs of increasing industry and economy, though we still affect to despise a cent, while the Treasury of the United States can count it and keep it. Let us remember, when we see in prophetic vision the noble future before us, that no people on earth are industrially or commercially great who have not abundant room in their pockets for a cent, and time enough to count it before they let it go. Laugh at it, ye throng of fools, turn from it, ye host of beggars: economy is to prosperity and honor what virtue is to the soul. It may have a rough exterior, it may not be in the latest fashion, but the woodsman who lays his axe at the root of a fire-scorched tree often finds that it is sound at heart.

One more word in this line. A well known citizen said some years ago that we had many devices, or schemes, of prosperity, but there did not any of them hold out. I once talked with a man who was the owner and manager of one of the finest ranches in the State. Among other rich products the most beautiful butter was made and sold at ninety cents a roll of two pounds, two ounces short. I asked him how long this was going to last. He replied that there was no reason why it should not last forever! I remonstrated that I could not understand how agriculture, most exposed to competition, could sustain such prices. He did not agree with me. I was not in the dairy business then, nor am I now. I do not claim to have any knowledge about it. Many of us remember what plans, enterprises, industries, and speculations have been devised "to bring us out," and set the State on the highway of prosperity. We have been in a

kind of experimental stage, trying everything, and while so many things have failed, come to an end, or been overcome, there has been a steady progress. The country was new to American habits, and it was far away. We have found that it is richly fitted for many things of which we never dreamed. There is one culture, however, the influence and value of which are not yet decided. I mean the cultivation of wines and brandies. What the final influence and result will be depends on future experience. Alcoholic liquors are a large item in the business of the world, attended with many dangers. It is a legitimate business, like the manufacture of dynamite, but the handling and sale should be conducted in a manner to protect society from its dangers. I do not notice an extraordinary number of drunkards, but there is an unusual number of heavy drinkers. Thirty years ago, the income or stamp tax on whiskey in this port yielded a greater revenue than from any other equal population in the country. In former years, there was a man here who kept a fashionable saloon, who told me that he had customers who drank eighteen glasses in a day, and were always sober. It has been estimated that in the future development of our State, the wine product will amount to one hundred million dollars annually. If so, that industry will be a great moral and social danger, which a high public morality will ever look upon with fear, and protect itself, as best it can, by wise and just laws. Thus far, the American and the Frenchman do not meet on equal terms; and I am told that a Frenchman, accustomed to wine and bread in his native vineyards, when transported to California, is not content with that frugal and temperate repast. In this city, among a heterogeneous population, there are more saloons, per

capita, than in any other city in the Union; and no power has arisen yet to restrain a business which probably makes more money, on the capital invested, than any other business, and costs society more than the leather, iron, and flour trade. The cultivation of wine and brandy will be second only to the influence of climate on the destiny of the State. But it may be reasonably hoped that other industries, not less important, will modify that, and give it a secondary importance in the development of a great commonwealth. At present, we are quite inclined to use the name of the State as an adjective in the superlative degree. Time will chasten our judgment, and we shall be satisfied with an honorable place among the States of the Republic.

An important and striking influence in the development of the resources of the State is the rapid increase of the means of communication. Not long ago San Francisco was twenty-four days from New York, and passage money four hundred dollars. The time has been reduced to five days and ten hours, and the traveling fee to less than one hundred dollars. The first and immediate influence of this transcontinental communication was to introduce some modifications of business methods, and bring affairs to commercial equilibrium across the country. The commercial spirit of business, long-minded, and laying its beams afar, came in collision with the provincial spirit, short-sighted, and near by. The theory of the minimum of business at the maximum of profit gradually gave way to the world-view of the maximum of business and the minimum of profit. To some this change seemed like the coming of the end of the world, and the heavens were passing away with a great noise, and the elements were melting with fervent

heat. The first continental road was a violent shock to our ways of business, which were the natural outcome of gold mining and provincial situation. The first road was the beginning of a new age; and, like all new periods, it found men as in the days before the flood, unaware of what was going on; and some did not see the ark. Facility of communication tends to the economic and commercial equilibrium of society, pools the world, and democratises nations. Like all great powers, it has its drawbacks here and there, but, on the whole, and through long stretches, it is the way of progress, the way of history. We hailed the open track across the mountains, and celebrated it with noise and processions and banners. It was the fulfillment of an enterprise that men had derided, and very naturally it gave pride and power to the projectors. Men in such position are rarely as wise as they think they are. Such is the infirmity of human character, and the public is not discriminating, though rudely just. It is no new thing for popular applause to be changed to complaint, or for power to be used without due sense of responsibility. It is not my purpose here to measure those two passions; I only refer to them as a phase of society, with this general remark, that they illustrate the spirit of business on the lines of relentless competition, that furnish no outlet to the fiery discontent that rages beneath.

But there is another influence of communication beside that of breaking into and flooding a provincial trade with the tides of commerce. There are four roads across the mountains to the sea. We have had the opinion that this port and city were the centre of commercial distribution for this western coast from British Columbia to Mexico, and inland to the Sierras. When the northern

road was opened it was thought that it would have no effect on the trade of this port or city. The practical result has been that our area of distribution north and south has been reduced from about two thousand miles, to say six hundred miles, and freights by overland carriage are no longer brought here to be sent back into the mountains, but are distributed along the road, after the fashion of country pedlars who bring their goods to the door, in the most economic way. The result of all this is to make this a retail city for a comparatively small population spread over twenty to fifty thousand square miles or so. The amount of goods that pass in transit does not contribute much to our wealth—nor can it be reckoned as an item in our commerce.

If we take stock now, this is about our situation. The gold-passion is exhausted by its own excesses. The mining interest, a business uncertain beyond the uncertainty of business in general, is, and is destined to be, an important item in the productive industry of the country. Agriculture is passing through its wild stage of cattle, and thousand-acre farming, to all precious fruits, and wine and oil. Manufactures are slowly developed, handicapped yet by the conditions of labor and transportation—while commerce sits pensive and thoughtful, her hands folded upon her lap, as she looks out upon the vacant, glassy, sea. Our situation is the natural and inevitable outcome of our history. Far away on a lonely shore, before the bare and rugged face of nature, in the presence of the precious metals to which men of all races and tribes flee as birds of prey to their quarry, there has been established society, without a parallel in the history of our own country or of any other country.

We have come at length to a period in our history,

when, chastened by experience, more moderate views succeed extravagant expectations. Sober men feel that the development and growth of the country must go on in something like historic order and not by a rush. Though we never should have been here, and the sea would have dashed idly on the shore, had it not been for the gold mines, we cannot stay on that account, or rear a powerful State. We have had many symptoms of exhaustion, many schemes of deliverance, many plans of prosperity. It seems to me that while we accept the former days, and give them all honor for the part they acted in the drama of history, we must go on out of that past into the sober industries and frugalities, that underlie solid wealth, and make competence and independence. I have no special wisdom concerning the future. The only thing that I feel sure of, is principle, moral principle. There are those who are quite sure that something is going to happen before long, just as we thought that the overland road would make us blest, and fill our valleys with happy populations, or as the rich and prosperous dairyman thought he would wet his steps with butter at ninety cents a roll, two ounces short. But I have a deep conviction that no such happening is going to be. What are called improvements will go on—the great canal will be digged for the ships, the mountain rivers will pour their floods upon the arid soil, and tumbling waters will transform their power to electric light and power—while easy transport from the valleys to the sea, and from the sea to mountain heights, will give the people change of air and scene, and thus minister to industry, frugality and gentle manners. The material development of the country will be relatively slow. No grand enterprise will work like a magician's spell, to leap our shadows, or take a short cut

to destiny. The tide of population will be turned to this vacant realm when it is shown that our lands will yield competence and comfort to small owners, of good habits and little money, and our rich products can find the markets of the world.

When I look upon a map of the world, or on a globe projection of the earth, I am impressed with what seems to me our inevitable destiny and the part our common country is to play in the drama of history—I mean our relation to the Asiatic races. I have always been of opinion that the development of this western coast of the Republic was closely allied to the awakening of the sleepy Orient, and modern years have strengthened my conviction. It is less than half a century since the guns of England made the first breach in the Chinese wall. That was the proclamation by the race to which has been committed the highest civilization of mankind, that no nation can shut itself up from the world. One-third of the human race hitherto withdrawn from the communion of nations and men, have joined the human family. Can it be that we here are to have no part in this great action? I cannot conceive it! I do not understand history so. I cannot lift the curtain that hides the future, but as the past bears the signals of a guiding providence, so the present flings out banners of the advancing God!

I have thus dwelt, too long, it may be, on what are called the material conditions, which were the beginning of society here. No just estimate of this western country can be given without taking inventory of the motives that inspired its first settlement, and of the great ground influences that gave it security. Those motives and influences, speaking broadly and historically, are the

passion for gold, the Constitution of the United States, and Chinese labor. Without the first, the country would not have been settled; without the second, it would have been a little fighting-cock government called a Pacific Republic; without the latter, there would have been no efficient working class.

And now I pass swiftly to the people themselves: the growth of society, opinion, education, and religion. Let us not boast, either because we were born here, or because we came here of our own will. Neither the coming or the being born is good ground of self-adulation. The early men of California were about the average men of mankind that have the traditions of law and order. They were subject to many vicissitudes and hardships, the will-o'-the-wisps of fortune, and the trials of dazzling success followed often by swift disappointment, such as takes the temper out of human steel. Their bones lie in many a mountain and valley grave, nor wind, nor sun, nor flowers of spring know their nameless rest. Thoughtful history alone drops a tear, and lifts up her onward song, "God having provided some better things for us, that they without us should not be made perfect."

Is there a "steady gain of man?" Is society more gentle and noble in manners and opinion? Is there a fresh flavor of uprightness and honor, wafted like iodines from the sea, amid the bad odors of public morals? Are there any summits to which we look up as to a brighter and purer air? The plane of humanity at large is public opinion — always low compared with a noble individual standard — and dependent on higher minds to lead it forward to higher fields. In a country like ours, the press is a tolerably true gauge of the average intelligence, refinement, and morals of society. A journalist, of all

men, adapts his work to society as it is, rather than to society as it ought to be. He gives what is most wished for, and what is most readily paid for. Thus, the stranger, the man of cosmopolitan mind, forms his opinion of the character and manners of the people as he reads the morning papers at his breakfast-table. The press is often careless of the truth, sometimes vicious, and often honorable. It is on the whole a fair reflection of society as it is. If not as ably conducted here as in former years, it is less bold and less wicked. The taste for the sensational, the horrid, and the criminal is very striking, and out of proportion with freedom or public duty. We have in this city and State a bad reputation for crimes of violence and passion — the list is appalling. But I am confident that the working up and detail of wickedness in the press, while in no sense required by public duty, does much to increase the impression of immorality and crime. The press also too often takes up the business of the court, and tries the case by a public discussion, that has no judicial mind, and no evidence that would be admitted in an honorable and just tribunal. The press is too exclusively given to making money to be truly high-minded. I do not say that it ought not to make money, but when money-making is the chief or only object, it relinquishes the high trust of educating the public mind, and guiding public opinion, and becomes the retailer of small gossip, and the scavenger of social scandal. A personal incident happened to me thirty years ago. Will you pardon my rudeness? It is a part of the scene. A manager of a paper devoted some time and space to vituperation and abuse of me. On a day I was introduced to him. I said to him: And you are the man that has spent so much

time on me! You are as mild a mannered man as ever scuttled a ship! But what is your idea of journalism? To which he replied: "Steaks from the golden calf"! I answered: When you come to the gallows I will be happy to be with you in your last moments. He treated me very politely ever after.

But let us remember, there are two sides to this, as there are to some other things. The press here reflects the public; the public makes it, and we pay for it. The press is the mirror of society, and if we do not like the look, we must improve our figures and complexion. It is the fashion to run down society, and to shift our responsibility as good citizens onto the public or the press. And we hear society abused, and this city black-guarded as the worst and wickedest city. That public opinion is low there can be no doubt; that there is much violence and crime is appallingly apparent; that there are dens of drink and lust, and loud manners, and vulgar wealth, is manifest to every observer. While to one of misanthropic temper or provincial experience the city seems a steaming heap of moral compost.

But any such view is quite inadequate. There is nothing here to prevent any man from living nobly in honor and virtue, and there are here as good-natured people as are on the earth. To the profound observer, human excellence is not on the surface of the world, nor is it most noisy. It is a silent power, like the sun, or like the seed cast upon the earth—it swells and grows, and buds, and casts off its husks, rises toward the day and revels in the light.

One of the most striking things in society here is the provision that has been made by public care or private gift for education. The common school has become a

part of the common understanding of American society; and a free state without it would be a kind of political monster. The great impulse that has been given to education during the last thirty years, the enlargement of the area of human knowledge, the extension of man's spiritual power over nature, and the idea of law as cause and effect, have opened new paths of thought, and new fields of action. A higher intelligence is required for the common arts and industries of life, and the expansion of studies to the dignity of something like liberal arts, is the characteristic of our time. I believe that, according to population and period of political organization, no State in the Union has richer endowments than California for the pursuit of studies, either beyond the common school age, or not included in the common school course. The establishment of the University of California is one of the important events of the last quarter of a century. The more recent establishment of Stanford University, by private endowment, is an illustrious instance of far-seeing public spirit, to be perpetuated in a great and powerful institution. These two institutions, at no remote day, will have a resident pupilage of ten thousand students. Besides these, the Cogswell, Lick and Wilmerding Technical Schools, are creations of opportunity and influence that will be profoundly felt in their effect on individual lives, and on the arts and industries of society. The remedy for the ills and wrongs we suffer is education in that large sense that includes the moral and intellectual nature of man, and relies on the evolution of the individual for the renovation of society. And this brings me to my last word, religion.

About one-fourth of the people of California belong to the Roman Catholic Church. They are not devotees, but

are bound by tradition to that division of Christendom. The rest of the population are divided among the different sects of Protestantism, and that large class who, without special religious affinities, have the natural moral and religious instincts of humanity. One of the common mistakes in regard to the influence of religion, and of religious institutions, is, that there is but a portion of the people who have any active interest in religion or the Church. Perhaps the true test of the importance and value of religious institutions would be to abolish them altogether. Imagine if you can a city, a State, or a nation in which there is no expression of religious sentiment, no prayer offered, no teaching given, no song, no counsel of sympathy, trust, or hope. To imagine such a condition, pictures society bereft of its loveliest sentiments, the individual as merely one of the animal creation, and the grave a pit. The primal interest of religion is with the individual, through the inspiring power of personality. It is forever, the "fifty righteous in the city" that saves the city. Let all secular movements go on, to relieve the stress of circumstances; the real source of energy is found in personal character, in the actual excellence and virtue that radiate from high and pure lives. No more vague and senseless notion ever possessed an honest but ignorant mind than the notion that the machinery of things will do the world's noblest work. All excellence, all renovating powers are finally vested in persons. And there can be nothing in a nation or a State or a city, however exalted its aims, or however perfectly organized, which is not in the persons composing the city, the State, or the nation. An ultimate standard of worth is an ideal of personal worth. All our inspirations, all our visions of eternal beauty are visions, re-

membered glances of persons, or some ineffable glory of Him, all good. To speak of any progress or improvement or development of a nation, or society, or mankind, except as relative to some greater worth of persons, is to use words without meaning.

This eternal moral and spiritual fact is the basis of religion, and of institutions for worship, prayer, and teaching. Man's nature overlaps this outward scenery of life and experience, and there are capacities in the human spirit not realizable in any conditions that we can conceive on earth. Our faith in that infinite Person, like ourselves, though infinitely above us, is justified by gleams of suggestion that a life lived here under conditions of limitation that thwart its full development, shall be continued in a society where the complete measure of our capacities shall be attained.

To this end is religion and its institutions — to set in operation moral agencies, not through the impersonal machinery of society, but by the presence and contact of good men and good women in the city, the State, or nation.

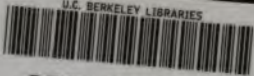
To this end every true teacher and preacher of religion is born, and to this end he comes into the world: to be the interpreter of human life in its sublime relations and terrible glories. This is my thought, my view, my convictions. How feebly I have filled it out in these years of the lifetime of a generation, I know, and God knows. But in no folly of self-adulation, but in deep and tender humility, this has been my aim; and my honor and respect for you are that you have sustained me in it, by your steadfast hearts and by your vision in the mount. I am and have been among you a much employed man. I have not withheld my hand or my heart as a minister, a

man or a citizen from any human interest, within the reach of limited capacity and prescribed duty. And my proud humility and gratitude are, under God, that men and women from every condition and circumstance of life have come to me simply because they thought I was human. If I could call the roll of those here or there or beyond, they would answer from near and far. Pardon this allusion to myself that is rather an expression of my gratitude than my pride. If life and strength are given, I may render you better service yet, the riper fruits of experience, some clearer vision of God.

Now, unto him who is able to do exceeding abundantly, above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him, be glory throughout all ages, world without end—Amen.

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